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## THE POLITICS OF JOHN ADAMS

AT the age of twenty-three John Adams wrote in his diary the following words: "Aim at an exact knowledge of the nature, end and means of government. Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their effects on public and private happiness." This programme he carried out. To the end of his life "no romance was more entertaining" than politics. They were to him the "divine science, the grandest, the noblest, the most useful . . . in the whole circle" of sciences; and his study of them was characterized by breadth and depth as well as zeal. The principles of government, so he wrote his kinsman, Samuel Adams, are to be found by the observation and study of "human nature, society and universal history." He acquainted himself thoroughly with the political theories of the great writers, ancient and modern—the works of Lord Bolingbroke, for example, he read through more than five times although, in his opinion, the author was "a haughty, arrogant, supercilious dogmatist;" but he owed far more to the direct study of "human nature, society and universal history" than to the conclusions of the philosophers. As a rule he quotes to refute; and his work presents in every part unmistakable signs of an original, independent, and profound thinker.

Public events soon gave to these studies a fresh impulse and at the same time a practical turn. Two years after the entry given above, John Adams listened to the plea of James Otis against the Writs of Assistance. It was an event of profound significance to colonial America and indeed to the British empire. "Otis's oration against writs of assistance," wrote John Adams long afterwards, "breathed into this nation the breath of life . . . American Independence was then and there born; the seeds of patriots and heroes were then and there sown . . . Every man of a crowded audience appeared to me to go away, as I did, ready to take up arms against writs of assistance. Then and there was the first scene of the first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain."<sup>1</sup>

One result of the plea of Otis was to direct attention to the

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Works*, X. 362.

question of the rights of the colonists. It was a time when the doctrine of natural rights was beginning to work its way into general favor; there was, indeed, considerable risk that it might become in America, as later in France, the basis of popular resistance to governmental oppression. The validity of this doctrine when reasonably interpreted and applied, is well established; but in practical use it is dangerous and greatly demoralizing. Indeed, it can hardly be doubted that if resistance to the oppressive policy of Great Britain had rested solely or mainly on the doctrine of natural rights, it must soon have degenerated into mob violence, and could not have developed into a successful revolution.

At this time John Adams was a young lawyer with an abundance of time for reading and thought. He was a graduate of Harvard, had taught school and studied law at Worcester, had enjoyed intercourse with a number of stimulating men; and, for his years, had read and re-read a phenomenal number of good books. His letters and diary show that he had made great progress in self-acquaintance; that his aims were of the highest; that he revered the truth; and that he criticized himself with unsparing severity. The important historic events of his early manhood were the Seven Years' War and the philosophical movement in Europe; and these had helped to confirm in him the disposition to take broad views and to trace things to their sources.

In the year 1765, with the solid equipment just described, John Adams, at the age of thirty, entered the service of his country. He wrote in August a series of articles, four in number, for the *Boston Gazette*, which were reproduced in the *London Chronicle*, and later were published together under the title, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*. The *Dissertation* began with a statement of the views of the writer upon the relation of the Stamp Act to general history, to the history of the colonies, and to their higher interests, civil, religious, and intellectual; it closed with advice as to the means proper for meeting the emergency created by the adoption of the policy embodied in this act. This production did much to prepare the people for the critical times that were just ahead; it discloses at the outset of his long career of patriotic service, the very heart and mind of the author. Our immediate interest, however, is to learn what it tells of his system of politics.

The *Dissertation* opens with the inquiry, What is the source of oppression? This is found in that "noble principle" of human nature which is also the source of freedom, namely, "the love of power." This principle has always prompted the great of the earth to free themselves from every limitation to their power, "has stim-

ulated the common people to aspire at independency, and to confine the power of the great within the limits of equity and reason." In this struggle the poor people have usually failed, because, owing to their ignorance, "they have seldom been able to frame and support a regular opposition." The great have taken advantage of this, and have labored "in all ages, to wrest from the populace . . . the knowledge of their rights and wrongs, and the power to assert the former or redress the latter. I say *Rights* for such they have . . . antecedent to all earthly government, *Rights* that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws—*Rights* derived from the Great Legislator of the Universe."

In these early paragraphs appear certain views that lie at the foundation of the politics of John Adams. The first is that slavery and freedom proceed from one and the same principle in human nature, namely the love of power; later in the *Discourses on Davila*, the more comprehensive phrase, "thirst for distinction" is substituted for "love of power"; but the change does not imply any departure from the original idea. A second view of the utmost importance to the comprehension of the system, is that this love of power is an "aspiring, noble principle, founded in benevolence." From this it follows that the aim of a wise public policy must be not to extirpate "the love of power" in the human heart, but so to direct and regulate its operation that it shall issue in freedom. It is certainly one of the noblest characteristics of John Adams that he felt habitually a profound reverence for human nature, and finds in the primary passions of man the proofs of divine wisdom. A third idea is that the common people have rights which are indefeasible. What these are he does not tell us here. But elsewhere he makes it evident that they include the right to equality with the great in the legal protection of person and property, the right to equal participation in law-making, the right of veto upon unfriendly legislation, and the right to education at the public expense.

The second portion of the *Dissertation* is historical. The canon and feudal law were invented by the great for their own advantage. In the canon law we have "the most refined, sublime, extensive and astonishing constitution of policy that was ever conceived by the mind of man," and the Romish clergy framed it "for the aggrandisement of their own order." The feudal law was formed for the same purposes as the canon law: it held the common people "in a state of servile dependence" and "of total ignorance of every thing divine and human excepting the use of arms and the culture of their lands." Then the supporters of these two systems made a "wicked confederacy," and "one age of darkness succeeded

another, till God in his benign providence, raised up the champions who began and conducted the Reformation." At that time knowledge began to spread "in Europe, but especially in England," and as it spread,

"the people grew more and more sensible of the wrong that was done them by these systems. . . . till at last under the execrable race of the Stuarts, the struggle between the people and the confederacy aforesaid of temporal and spiritual tyranny, became formidable, violent and bloody. It was this great struggle that peopled America. It was not religion alone, as is commonly supposed ; but it was a love of universal liberty, and a hatred, a dread, a horror of the infernal confederacy before described, that projected, conducted and accomplished the settlement of America. It was a resolution formed by a sensible people—I mean the Puritans—almost in despair. . . . After their arrival here, they . . . formed their plan, both of ecclesiastical and civil government, in direct opposition to the canon and feudal systems. . . . Whatever imperfections may be justly ascribed to them, which, however, are as few as any mortals have discovered, their judgment in framing their policy was founded in wise, humane and benevolent principles. It was founded in revelation and in reason too. It was consistent with the principles of the best and greatest and wisest legislators of antiquity. Tyranny in every form, shape and appearance was their disdain and abhorrence. . . . They were very far from being enemies to monarchy ; and they knew as well as any men the just regard and honor that is due to the character of a dispenser of the mysteries of the gospel of grace. But they saw clearly that popular powers must be placed as a guard, a control, a balance, to the powers of the monarch and the priest, in every government. Their greatest concern seems to have been to establish a government of the church more consistent with the Scriptures, and a government of the state more agreeable to the dignity of human nature. . . . They knew that government was a plain, simple, intelligible thing, founded in nature and reason, and quite comprehensible by common sense. . . . They were convinced by their knowledge of human nature, derived from history and their own experience, that nothing could preserve their posterity from the encroachments of the two systems of tyranny . . . but knowledge diffused generally through the whole body of the people. . . . For this purpose they laid very early the foundations of colleges. . . . But the wisdom and benevolence of our fathers rested not here. They made an early provision by law that every town consisting of so many families, should be always furnished with a grammar school. They made it a crime for such a town to be destitute of a grammar schoolmaster for a few months, and subjected it to a heavy penalty. So that the education of all ranks of people was made the care and expense of the public, in a manner that I believe has been unknown to any other people, ancient or modern. . . . The consequences of these establishments we see and feel every day. A native of America who cannot read and write is

as rare an appearance as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, that is, as rare as a comet or an earthquake. It has been observed that we are all of us lawyers, divines, politicians and philosophers.”<sup>1</sup>

For our purpose it is not the accuracy and justice of the account in which the writer describes the rise of the canon and feudal law, that chiefly concern us ; what we care to note is the conception of the significance as an event in the history of the world, of the planting and peculiar development of the Puritan colonies in America. To their founders he ascribes the loftiest aims ; in their devotion, steadfastness of purpose, unflinching courage, and eminently practical wisdom he sees the noblest spiritual traits ; and in their achievements the highest form and furthest advance of human progress. The mission of the new world has dawned upon him in all its grandeur : “ I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

The Stamp Act proves the existence of “ a design to enslave all America.” How shall we baffle this design ? Only by imitating the example of those who founded the colonies ; like them we must “ diffuse knowledge generally through the whole body of the people.” For

“ liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator, who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know ; but besides this they have a right, an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean of the characters and conduct of their rulers. Rulers are no more than attorneys, agents, and trustees, for the people ; and if the cause, the interest and trust, is insidiously betrayed, or wantonly trifled away, the people have a right to revoke the authority that they themselves have deputed, and to constitute abler and better agents, attorneys and trustees. And the preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks, is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country. It is even of more consequence to the rich themselves, and to their posterity.”

Without knowledge the spirit of liberty

“ would be little better than a brutal rage. Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore, the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write . . . Let all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government, ecclesiastical and civil. Let

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, III. 449-456.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, III. 452.

us study the law of nature ; search into the spirit of the British constitution ; read the histories of ancient ages ; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome ; set before us the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us the inherent rights of mankind against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers, against arbitrary kings and cruel priests . . . . Let us read and recollect and impress upon our souls the views and ends of our own more immediate forefathers, in exchanging their native country for a dreary, inhospitable wilderness. Let us examine into the nature of that power, and the cruelty of that oppression, which drove them from their homes . . . . Let us recollect it was liberty, the hope of liberty for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials . . . . Let the pulpit resound with the doctrines and sentiments of religious liberty . . . . Let the bar proclaim, ' the laws, the rights, the generous plan of power ' delivered down from remote antiquity, inform the world of the mighty struggles and numberless sacrifices made by our ancestors in defence of freedom . . . . Let them search for the foundations of British laws and government in the frame of human nature, in the constitution of the intellectual world. There let us see that truth, liberty, justice, and benevolence, are its everlasting basis . . . . Let the public disputations (in the Colleges) become researches into the grounds and nature and ends of government, and the means of preserving the good and demolishing the evil."<sup>1</sup>

This prologue, which reveals the character as well as the political principles of John Adams, furnishes the key to his career. The attitude here taken is that of a statesman who studies public questions in their largest aspects, who asks how they relate themselves to the past, to the future and to those interests of the people which concern character and destiny; and this attitude he maintains to the end.

The first period in the public career of John Adams covers the years from the Stamp Act to the first Continental Congress, 1765 to 1774. In September of the year first named he wrote the *Instructions* of the town of Braintree to its representatives in the General Court. In these he set forth in clear terms that theory of nullification which has played so great a part in American constitutional history. The Stamp Act violated—so the writer held—fundamental constitutional rights, rights well-defined, long enjoyed and essential to the welfare of the people. He declared the Stamp Act unconstitutional because

" we have always understood it to be a grand and fundamental principle of the constitution, that no freeman should be subject to any tax to which he has not given his own consent in person or by proxy. And the maxims of the law, as we have constantly received them, are to the same effect, that no freeman can be separated from his

<sup>1</sup> III. 462-463.

property but by his own act or fault. We take it clearly, therefore, to be inconsistent with the spirit of the common law, and of the essential fundamental principles of the British constitution, that we should be subject to any tax imposed by the British Parliament; because we are not represented in that assembly in any sense, unless it be by a fiction of law, as insensible in theory as it would be injurious in practice, if such a taxation should be grounded on it."

But if these remonstrances should not be heeded: . . .

"We further recommend the most clear and explicit assertion and vindication of our rights and liberties to be entered on the public records, that the world may know, in the present and all future generations, that we have a clear knowledge and a just sense of them, and, with submission to Divine Providence, that we never can be slaves."<sup>1</sup>

That these instructions adequately expressed the convictions of his fellow-citizens was soon made evident; forty towns in addition to Braintree accepted them as their own, and Samuel Adams incorporated some of the stronger passages in the instructions which he drew up for Boston.

This work of political education was carried on, not, however, without considerable interruptions, throughout the period of resistance. One of the most important services in this line was a number of articles signed *Novanglus* in reply to a series written by the loyalist, Daniel Leonard, over the signature *Massachusettensis*. Leonard's arguments had made a deep impression; to remove this John Adams, who found on his return from Congress "in the month of November, 1774 . . . the *Massachusetts Gazette* teeming with political speculations, and *Massachusettensis* shining like the moon among the lesser stars . . . instantly resolved to enter the lists." These articles, while of uneven merit in respect to argument, served well the end for which they were written.<sup>2</sup> Another important function of Mr. Adams during these years was that of legal counsellor to the patriotic party. His advice was sought and followed in the graver controversies with Governor Hutchinson; and it was he who originated the brilliant and wholly successful project to impeach Chief-Justice Oliver.<sup>3</sup> His part throughout was that of a law-abiding citizen. He discountenanced the numerous acts of violence directed against the persons and property of the Loyalists; his approval of the destruction of the tea in Boston Harbor rested on political grounds; his defense of Captain Preston and his soldiers exhibited in the clearest light his respect for legal rights and his purpose to do his duty at whatever cost to popularity. Until 1774

<sup>1</sup> III. 466.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, IV. 5-177.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, II. 328-332.

he was a lawyer seeking professional success and at the same time serving his countrymen as their unsalaried teacher and adviser in matters pertaining to constitutional rights and the higher politics. In 1774 came a great change. He was chosen a delegate to the first Continental Congress. Henceforth for twenty-seven years, and without a break, he was to give his entire services to his country. Instantly the field widened; the continent took the place of the single colony; he journeyed to Philadelphia as a son of Massachusetts, an inquisitive and sometimes sharply critical observer of the strange peoples and manners that he met there and on the way thither; he returned from Philadelphia a continental American.

The second period extends from the assembling of the first Continental Congress to the treaty in which Great Britain acknowledged the independence of the United States, 1774 to 1783.

The work of John Adams at Philadelphia is too well known to call for rehearsal in this place.<sup>1</sup> He took part in the measures looking to reconciliation, but had little or no faith in their efficacy. He labored strenuously and with success for two ends: the union of the colonies and the separation from Great Britain. In so doing he brought himself into disfavor with Dickinson and other conservatives, but at the same time laid the foundations of that influence which later made him the strongest of the leaders of the Continental Congress. His motive in proposing the appointment of Washington to the command of the army was to promote the union of the colonies. He formed durable friendships with representative men from the different colonies. Through these friendships the way was opened for the propagation of his ideas on the proper structure of government. The Declaration of Independence was in one sense a personal vindication; but his letters, written at this period, speak only of the joy and exultation of the large-souled patriot who is also a seer and prophet:

“When I look back to the year 1761, and recollect the argument concerning writs of assistance in the superior court, which I have hitherto considered as the commencement of this controversy between Great Britain and America, and run through the whole period from that time to this, and recollect the series of political events, the chain of causes and effects, I am surprised at the suddenness as well as greatness of this revolution. . . . It is the will of Heaven that the two countries should be sundered forever. It may be the will of Heaven that America shall suffer calamities still more wasting, and distresses yet more dreadful. If this is to be the case,

<sup>1</sup> In Judge Chamberlain's excellent essay entitled *John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution*, we have for the first time what seems to me an adequate estimate of the revolutionary service of John Adams.

it will have this good effect at least. It will inspire us with many virtues which we have not, and correct many errors, follies, and vices which threaten to disturb, dishonor, and destroy us. The furnace of affliction produces refinement in states as well as individuals. And the new Governments we are assuming in every part will require a purification from our vices, and an augmentation of our virtues, or they will be no blessings. The people will have unbounded power, and the people are extremely addicted to corruption and venality, as well as the great. But I must submit all my hopes and fears to an overruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the faith may be, I firmly believe. . . . The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore. You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure that it will cost us to maintain this Declaration and support and defend these States. Yet, through all the gloom, I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory."<sup>1</sup>

During the middle portion of this period Mr. Adams was chairman of the Board of War and a member of many other important congressional committees. Although possessing in but a moderate degree the talents for organization and administration which distinguished his later rival, Alexander Hamilton, he brought to these tasks certain qualities of mind and character which in a situation of appalling difficulty were of the highest value: he never doubted; he never quailed; he always had a plan; and his own faith and courage he communicated to others. In a very high degree he was the source of the moral energy without which the Revolution must have failed. These qualities he carried abroad and to them he owed his remarkable diplomatic success in Holland. At the Court of France it soon appeared that he could not work with Franklin:—so unlike and antipathetic were they by nature; nor could he reach an understanding with Vergennes, so that his record there was one of well-meant, unsparing but unsuccessful efforts. This failure, however, was nobly redeemed by the part he took in the negotiations for peace. To him in a special sense, his country owed her rights in the fisheries and a considerable portion of her territory. One graphic pen-picture of himself as a maker of this treaty is included in his diary. When discussing the American demands in regard to the fisheries an English negotiator proposed to substitute the word

<sup>1</sup> *Familiar Letters*, pp. 193, 194.

"liberty" for "right." "Upon this I rose up and said. 'Gentlemen, is there or can there be a clearer right? . . . When God Almighty made the banks of Newfoundland at three hundred leagues distance from the people of America, and at six hundred leagues distance from those of France and England, did he not give as good a right to the former as to the latter? If Heaven in the creation gave a right it is ours at least as much as yours. If occupation, use, and possession give a right, we have it as clearly as you. If war, and blood, and treasure give a right, ours is as good as yours.'"<sup>1</sup>

It is safe to say that the United States have never had a representative at a foreign court who better understood American rights or defended them more manfully. His country "was destined," so he believed, "to be the greatest power on earth;" and his claims for her were based on that belief. This was one of the reasons—perhaps the chief one—for his dislike of Vergennes: "I told him [Mr. Hartley, one of the British negotiators], the Comte de Vergennes and I were pursuing different objects; he was endeavoring to make my countrymen meek and humble, and I was laboring to make them proud; I avowed it was my object to make them hold up their heads and look down upon any nation that refused to do them justice."<sup>2</sup> In a letter to the President of Congress, dated Paris, September 5, 1783, he writes of national pride as follows:

"We may call this national vanity or national pride, but it is the main principle of the national sense of its own dignity, and a passion in human nature, without which nations cannot preserve the character of man. Let the people lose this sentiment, as in Poland, and a partition of their country will soon take place. Our country has but lately been a dependent one, and our people, although enlightened and virtuous, have had their minds and hearts habitually filled with all the passions of a dependent and subordinate people; that is to say, with fear, with diffidence, and distrust of themselves, with admiration of foreigners, &c. Now, I say, that it is one of the most necessary and one of the most difficult branches of the policy of congress to eradicate from the American mind every remaining fibre of this fear and self-diffidence on one hand, and of this excessive admiration of foreigners on the other."<sup>3</sup>

Bitter indeed were his reflections upon that (fortunately disregarded) act of Congress which virtually transferred the negotiation from its own ministers to a foreign court. "Congress surrendered their own sovereignty into the hands of a French minister. Blush! Blush! ye guilty records! blush and perish! It is a glory to have broken such infamous orders."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, III. 333.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, III. 365.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, VIII. 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, III. 359.

It fairly summarizes the foreign policy of John Adams to say that in the course of his diplomatic career we find him the earnest advocate of every principle of foreign policy recommended more than a decade afterwards in Washington's Farewell Address.

But even more important to the welfare of the United States than his services in Congress and abroad, great as they undoubtedly were, was the part he took in the reconstruction of government in the several colonies. The opportunity made a deep impression upon Adams. To Patrick Henry he wrote: "You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life at a time when the greatest law-givers of antiquity would have wished to live. . . . When, before the present epocha, had three millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the happiest and wisest government that human wisdom can contrive?"<sup>1</sup> This work began a few months before the Declaration of Independence, and in determining its character John Adams had far more influence than any other one man. Moreover, in directing the reorganization of government in the states, he was helping to lay the foundations of a national government for the United States.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, IV. 200.

<sup>2</sup> The materials for a study of the political system of John Adams are: 1. A letter to Richard Henry Lee, dated Philadelphia, November 15, 1775 (*Works*, IV. 185-187). 2. A letter to George Wythe, written in January, 1776, which was published under the title, *Thoughts on Government* (*ibid.*, 193-200). 3. A letter to John Penn in response to a request from the colonial legislature of North Carolina for the views of Mr. Adams on the "nature of the government it would be proper to form in case of the final dissolution of the authority of the Crown." This letter reproduces the substance of the *Thoughts on Government*, but in some places gives a fuller statement of the views of the writer (*ibid.*, 203-209). 4. *Report of the Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. This was written in September 1779, and contains the ideas of Mr. Adams on the subject of government in their most complete and systematic form. Especially valuable is that portion of the report which contains the Declaration of Rights. Of the thirty articles, the third only, which provides for public worship, was not included in the original draft by Mr. Adams. Most of the changes made later by the Committee and the Convention affect the expression rather than the substance of the author's views. He had also the leading part in drafting the second part of the Constitution, or the *Frame of Government* (*ibid.*, 213-267). In order to appreciate the importance of Mr. Adams's *Model of Government* for Massachusetts and of the earlier sketches in the *Thoughts on Government*, it is necessary to remember that at the time they were prepared each of the American commonwealths was regarded as a sovereign state and that the constitution proposed was designed for such a state (*ibid.*, 217). 5. *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, in three volumes. The first volume was published in 1787, the second and third in the following year (*ibid.*, 269-588; V., VI. 1-220). 6. *Discourses on Davila*, published in 1790 (*ibid.*, 221-399). The *Defence* and the *Discourses* have the same object, namely, to establish by an appeal to history the soundness of the author's views on government as set forth in the *Thoughts and Model*.

Of great value too as expositions of the system are four letters of John Adams and Samuel Adams on government (*ibid.*, 405-426); three letters to Roger Sherman (*ibid.*, 427-442); a series of thirty-two letters to John Taylor (*ibid.*, 443-521), and a Review

John Adams held that in a properly constructed government there should be three branches, the legislative, executive and judicial. The legislative branch should consist, first, of an assembly to represent the people or the democratic element; second, of a senate to represent the aristocratic element; and lastly, of an executive to represent the state in its entirety; to act as umpire in cases of dispute between the aristocratic and democratic branches of the legislature; and to be the protector of each in case of an attempt at encroachment by the other. Each division of the legislature should possess an absolute veto. The judges should be appointed by the executive; should hold their offices during good behavior; and should not be subject to intimidation in the matter of salary. It is obvious that in its general framework this structure corresponds quite closely with that of England. Notable differences, however, are the more complete and uniform representation of the people, and the substitution of the elective for the hereditary principle in constituting the senate and executive. In respect to representation and the exclusion of the hereditary principle the system reproduces that of the colonies; in respect to the dependence of the senate and executive upon the people, the system conforms to that of Massachusetts (under her first charter), Connecticut and Rhode Island. The right of the executive to an absolute veto was copied from the theory of the English Constitution and from the actual practice in most of the colonies; in England it had not been exercised for nearly a century; but in all the colonies, except Rhode Island and Connecticut, both the royal and proprietary governors had used it so freely and in many cases so improperly, that it had become exceedingly obnoxious. It will be noted that the structural principle underneath this system is the independence of the several parts.

Turning to the views of Adams in regard to public policy we find that the end of government is the "happiness of the people." But the happiness of the people consists "in virtue," hence the effort of the statesman should be to secure the happiness of the people by the development of the "best character." The influence of a public man or measure upon the character of the people is to him a matter of prime importance. In furtherance of this end, namely, the development of the best character, public policy should foster religion, morality, and learning.<sup>1</sup>

of a Proposition for Amending the Constitution, submitted by Mr. Hillhouse to the Senate of the United States in 1808 (*ibid.*, 525-550).

<sup>1</sup> Article second of the Declaration of Rights which forms the first division of the Constitution of Massachusetts, affirms it to be "the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons, to worship the SUPREME BEING" (*Works*, IV, 221). He

John Adams made religion the basis of his system of politics. He believed that the foundations of every political system are to be looked for in certain enduring convictions in respect to God, Nature and Man. Beneath systems of tyranny lie the conceptions of deity as cruel and despotic, of the natural world as ill regulated and unfriendly, of man as weak and unworthy; beneath systems of freedom lie the opposed convictions, that God is just and merciful, that the laws which govern the universe have their source in wisdom and goodness, and that in the nature of man there is a divine element which invests every human being with dignity, with rights and duties and with an infinite capacity for progress towards the ideally perfect.

There is no recorded word of John Adams which expresses a doubt of the existence of God, or of His justice, goodness, and active agency in the government of the world; on the contrary his diary, letters, and public utterances as well as his conduct prove that by nature and conviction he was deeply religious, and that he regarded true religion as the indispensable basis of human welfare private and public. He could not, however, accept the Calvinistic views which in his day still ruled New England theology. They contradicted too sharply his sense of the divine justice and goodness; it was for this reason that he decided soon after graduation from college to abandon the plan of entering the ministry and to prepare himself instead for the profession of the law. But in rejecting certain features of Calvinism he did not reject religion; on the contrary the rejection was for him a step towards a more natural and perfect development of the religious life. The best statesman in his view was he who most clearly discerned and most faithfully copied the divine plan of government.

"Statesmen . . . may plan and speculate for liberty," so he wrote at the age of eighty-five, "but it is religion and morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand." His view of the Christian religion as a factor in political education appears in one of the latest entries in his diary: "One great advantage of the Christian religion is, that it brings the great principle of the law of nature and nations—Love your neighbor as yourself,

wished to make the Christian religion a qualification for the office of governor, senator, and representative of Massachusetts. In his inaugural address as President he declares it his "fixed resolution to consider a decent respect for Christianity among the best recommendations for public service." (*Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, I. 232.) Although to the end of his days a "meeting-going animal," he was no bigot in matters of religion. He wished the Continental Congress to have nothing to do with religion except to "say their own prayers" and appoint each year a public Fast and Thanksgiving. In both of the constitutional conventions of which he was a member, he was ready to go further than his associates in establishing religious freedom.

and do to others as you would that others should do to you—to the knowledge, belief, and veneration of the whole people. . . . No other institution for education, no kind of political discipline, could diffuse this kind of necessary information, so universally. . . . The duties and rights of the man and the citizen are thus taught from early infancy to every creature.”<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to his wife dated November 5, 1775, he discourses on the relations of religion to patriotism as follows: “A true patriot must be a religious man. I have been led to think . . . that he who neglects his duty to his Maker may well be expected to be deficient and insincere in his duties towards the public. Even suppose him to possess a large share of what is called honor and public spirit, yet do not these men, by their bad example, by a loose immoral conduct, corrupt the minds of youth and vitiate the morals of the age and thus injure the public more than they can compensate by intrepidity, generosity and honor?”<sup>2</sup> And yet no religious man of his day was more tolerant than he.

Other essential features of a sound public policy are a generous provision for the education of the people, liberality towards institutions of higher learning and fair compensation for public service. Adams held that the people could not afford to accept uncompensated service; to do so was inconsistent with their self-respect, and in the end would prove costly and demoralizing.

The third period extends from the treaty of peace to the election of Mr. Adams as President, 1783 to 1796. He remained abroad five years after signing the treaty. One was spent in diplomatic service in Holland, the others as minister plenipotentiary at the court of St. James. In the drama of history, it was a great moment when John Adams the former arch-rebel first stood in the presence of George III., as the representative of a free people, once the loyal subjects of His Britannic Majesty; and who could know and feel its significance so well as he to whom this august scene was the consummation of all that he had hoped and toiled for? His own account shows how profoundly his whole nature was stirred; and nobly did he bear himself; when he declared “I have no attachment save to my own country,” even the King was moved, and uttered the true-hearted words: “No honest man will have any other.” But this proved to be only a transient gleam of good sense and magnanimity on the part of the monarch; the perverseness through which he had alienated and lost the colonies, led him and his ministers to refuse the rational and mutually beneficial propositions of Mr. Adams in regard to commerce. The minister and his

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, III. 423.

<sup>2</sup> *Familiar Letters*, 122.

family were made to feel both at court and in society, and in a very personal way, the dislike and disesteem in which their country was held. Even Burke and Camden, whom Americans justly revered, seemed to the sufferer participants in the ignoble persecution. But what had these unhappy experiences to do with the politics of John Adams? It is probable that they account in some measure for that feeling of settled distrust towards English policy, that pessimism in respect to the future of England, and that prompt rejection of every measure of foreign policy which would in any degree make the United States dependent upon England that marked his course henceforth,—for, in short, that policy towards England which was a chief cause of difference between himself and the Federalist party.

Baffled in his efforts at the English court and moved by ill news from America where the democracy was seeking, especially in Massachusetts, to overthrow the balanced system of government in the establishment of which he had taken so distinguished a part, John Adams seized the occasion offered by the belated publication of M. Turgot's criticisms of the American governments, to write a defence of the principles on which they were founded. He began this work in October of 1786, and finished it in late December of 1787. The first volume, entitled *A Defence of the Constitutions of the Governments of the United States of America*, reached Philadelphia in time to influence the deliberations of the framers of the Constitution of 1787. The work is a defence on philosophical and historical grounds of the balanced system of government already described. In a special sense it is a defence of the aristocratic and executive elements of government; for these were then under attack. The general result of an extended survey of the history of governments, ancient, medieval and modern, and of theories of government set forth by writers on politics, may be stated as follows: Every simple government, whether democratic, aristocratic or monarchical, is of necessity despotic: among such, as reason would teach us to expect, history clearly proves that the democratic is the worst. What actually came to pass a few years later in that phase of the French Revolution named the Reign of Terror, the writer foretold as the natural result of the attempt to establish a purely democratic government. Moreover, although the plan of a simple democracy has been tried in a number of instances, it has never yet succeeded; nor in the nature of the case, can it ever do so. Despotism is equally inevitable under a simple aristocracy or monarchy. Nor can we find a single instance of good and stable government under systems which unite any two of the three principles while excluding the third; for in such equilibrium is impossible;

a struggle for ascendancy is sure to follow ; and this must issue after the overthrow of the weaker principle in the despotism of the stronger. A feature of the *Defence* which aroused the distrust of radical democrats at home was the emphasis laid upon the value of the aristocratic element in the state. To seek to do away with aristocracy is idle ; for it is a creation of nature. Whatever a man possesses that gives him an advantage over others makes of him an aristocrat. There is nowhere a society without its aristocratic section. To this belong those who have beauty, the well-born, the rich, the talented, the virtuous. Boston has her nobles—so he wrote Samuel Adams—as well as Madrid. “Hereditary powers and peculiar privileges enter in no degree necessarily into the definition of Aristocracy ;” and the Americans have wisely discarded them. The views of John Adams upon aristocracy have been so widely misapprehended that they should be stated in his own words. In 1814, in a series of letters to John Taylor, he gave what is perhaps the most comprehensive of the many definitions that may be traced to his pen :

“By natural aristocracy, in general, may be understood those superiorities of influence in society which grow out of the constitution of human nature. By artificial aristocracy, those inequalities of weight and superiorities of influence which are created and established by civil laws. Terms must be defined before we can reason. By aristocracy, I understand all those men who can command, influence, or procure more than an average of votes ; by an aristocrat, every man who can and will influence one man to vote besides himself. Few men will deny that there is a natural aristocracy of virtues and talents in every nation and in every party, in every city and village. Inequalities are a part of the natural history of man.”<sup>1</sup>

“This natural aristocracy among mankind, has been dilated on, because it is a fact essential to be considered in the institution of a government. It forms a body of men which contains the greatest collection of virtues and abilities in a free government, is the brightest ornament and glory of the nation, and may always be made the greatest blessing of society, if it be judiciously managed in the constitution. But if this be not done, it is always the most dangerous, nay, it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth . . . There is but one expedient yet discovered, to avail society of all the benefits from this body of men, which they are capable of affording, and at the same time, to prevent them from undermining or invading the public liberty ; and that is, to throw them all, or at least the most remarkable of them, into one assembly together, in the legislature ; to keep all the executive power entirely out of their hands as a body ; to erect a first magistrate over them, invested with the whole executive authority ; to make them

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, VI. 451.

dependent on that same executive magistrate for all public executive employments ; to give that first magistrate a negative on the legislature.”<sup>1</sup>

Strongly too did he emphasize the necessity for an executive deriving his authority directly from the people, completely independent of the legislature, capable of representing “the majesty, persons, wills and power of the people in the administration of government and dispensing of laws,” and powerful enough to maintain “the balance between the Senate and House, or in other words between the aristocratical and democratical interests.”

As happened when the state governments were formed, so now at the framing of the national Constitution the views of John Adams were accepted only in part. To the Senate was given a participation in executive functions which Mr. Adams predicted would transform the President of the United States into a slave of party, and at the same time would corrupt the Senate. Legislative participation in the appointing power he thought as baneful to government as rust to iron, as arsenic to the human body. He also thought it a great defect of the Constitution that it did not give to the President the absolute veto.

The election of John Adams to the vice-presidency in 1788, and re-election four years later, prove that despite the unpopular doctrines of the *Defence*, he was still, in the esteem of the people, second only to Washington. During these comparatively tranquil years he gave cordial support to Washington and the Federalist party. In 1790 while the French Revolution was still under the control of the moderates, he took his pen in hand and in a series of *Discourses on Davila* pointed out the grave not to say ruinous errors committed by the leaders of that fateful movement. He did more : in order to make the reasonableness of his condemnation evident, he formulated more fully than in his earlier writings the theory of social man on which his system of politics rested :

“Men, in their primitive conditions, however savage, were undoubtedly gregarious ; and they continue to be social, not only in every stage of civilization, but in every possible situation in which they can be placed. As nature intended them for society, she has furnished them with passions, appetites, and propensities, as well as a variety of faculties, calculated both for their individual enjoyment, and to render them useful to each other in their social connections. There is none among them more essential or remarkable, than the passion for distinction. A desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows, is one of the earliest, as well as keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man . . . The desire of the esteem of others is as real a want of

<sup>1</sup>*Works*, IV. 397, 398.

nature as hunger ; and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone."

"The poor man's conscience is clear ; yet he is ashamed. His character is irreproachable ; yet he is neglected and despised. He feels himself out of the sight of others, groping in the dark. Mankind take no notice of him. He rambles and wanders unheeded. In the midst of a crowd, at church, in the market, at a play, at an execution, or coronation, he is in as much obscurity as he would be in a garret or a cellar. He is not disapproved, censured or reproached ; he is only not seen. . . . If you follow these persons, however, into their scenes of life, you will find that there is a kind of figure which the meanest of them all endeavors to make ; a kind of little grandeur and respect, which the most insignificant study and labor to procure in the small circle of their acquaintances. Not only the poorest mechanic, but the man who lives upon common charity, nay, the common beggars in the streets ; and not only those who may be all innocent, but even those who have abandoned themselves to common infamy, as pirates, highwaymen and common thieves, court a set of admirers, and plume themselves upon that superiority which they have, or fancy they have, over some others. There must be one, indeed, who is the last and lowest of the human species. But there is no risk in asserting, that there is no one who believes and will acknowledge himself to be the man. To be wholly overlooked, and to know it, are intolerable. When a wretch could no longer attract the notice of a man, woman or child, he must be respectable in the eyes of his dog. 'Who will love me then?' was the pathetic reply of one, who starved himself to feed his mastiff, to a charitable passenger, who advised him to kill or sell the animal. In this 'who will love me then?' there is a key to the human heart ; to the history of human life and manners, and to the rise and fall of empires.

"This passion, while it is simply a desire to excel another, by fair industry in the search of truth and the practice of virtue, is properly called Emulation. When it aims at power, as a means of distinction, it is Ambition. When it is in a situation to suggest the sentiments of fear and apprehension, that another, who is now inferior, will become superior, it is denominated Jealousy. When it is in a state of mortification, at the superiority of another, and desires to bring him down to our level, or to depress him below us, it is properly called Envy. When it deceives a man into a belief of false professions of esteem or admiration, or into a false opinion of his importance in the judgment of the world, it is Vanity. These observations alone would be sufficient to show, that this propensity, in all its branches, is a principal source of the virtues and vices, the happiness and misery of human life ; and that the history of mankind is little more than a simple narration of its operation and effects."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Works*, VI. 232-239.

From such principles it followed that those Frenchmen who were striving to suppress the inequalities which arise from this universal "thirst for distinction" were at war with nature. Indeed, Adams held that the only equality practicable and desirable is equality before the laws. "Too many Frenchmen," so he wrote Dr. Price, "after the example of too many Americans, pant after equality of persons and property. The impracticability of this God Almighty has decreed."<sup>1</sup> Such views and sentiments however wise ran counter to the strong tides of American political passion. The result to himself of giving them utterance he afterwards described in a letter to Jefferson: "In truth my *Defence of the Constitutions* and *Discourses on Davila* were the causes of that immense unpopularity which fell like the tower of Siloam upon me. Your steady defence of democratic principles, and your invariable favorable opinion of the French Revolution, laid the foundation of your unbounded popularity."<sup>2</sup> And yet despite this immense unpopularity with the democratic masses, despite the well-grounded fear of many Federalist leaders that this man of strong will and independent views might prove unmanageable, and despite the treacherous plan to give to Pinckney the place which the voters allotted to him, John Adams was chosen as the successor of Washington.

With this event opened the last chapter of his public career. Throughout the previous period, fidelity to his country and to his political system had made him the advocate of a policy that coincided with that of the Federalists; but now the tie between him and the leaders of the Federalist party, particularly those whose homes were in the North, was about to be broken. The forces that did this were two: first a difference of view in respect to foreign policy; and second, a disagreement as to the proper functions and rights of the executive. We need not rehearse here the story of the struggle between the President and his cabinet, the latter acting under the direction of Hamilton and in collusion with leading Federalist senators: it will suffice to point out that when the secretaries undertook to thwart the President in his purpose to renew negotiations with France, and also when they sought by a clandestine appeal to Washington to secure the appointment of Hamilton to the virtual command of the army, they arrogated to themselves rights which the Constitution had conferred upon their official chief. Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry were not prompted by motives of personal ambition. They were doing the will of a division of the Federal party whose leader was Hamilton; their plan was to transfer to him the high functions which belong to the President. No one ques-

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, IX. 564.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, X. 54.

tions now that John Adams was in the right in renewing the negotiations with France ; in the long series of services that he rendered his country, this was certainly one of the most heroic and beneficent. Nor does any one question now his view of the functions of President and cabinet. But in bestowing peace on his country and in maintaining the rights of her chief magistrate he alienated an important section of the Federal party.

The party revolution of 1800 brought the public career of John Adams to a close, but not, however, until he had named John Marshall as chief justice, a nomination second in importance in its bearing on the welfare of the Union only to that which was made by him a quarter of a century earlier, when he proposed the name of George Washington as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army.

With the possible exception of Daniel Webster no other American statesman of the highest rank has retired so hated and unfriended as did John Adams. The followers of Jefferson regarded him as a monarchist and a persecutor of democrats ; the followers of Hamilton as a traitor to the cause of Federalism. But the truth is that his course from the beginning was singularly consistent. His simple creed was this : in order that a state may prosper it must have in its government a democratic element, an aristocratic element and an executive ; each of these must be strong enough to maintain its rights ; but each must be checked in its attempts to encroach upon the others. In the first and second periods he devoted himself to the championship of the endangered American democracy and to the reconstruction of the colonial governments on the lines given above ; in the third period he devoted himself to the championship of the aristocratic interest against the encroaching disposition of the democracy, and to the further exposition and defence of his system ; in the fourth period he devoted himself to the championship of the executive against the encroachments of the aristocratic party ; and he was surely in the right. We name only half the truth in claiming for America the mission to produce a finer type of democracy ; a strong and healthful democracy without a strong and healthful aristocracy is impossible ; the two are essential parts of one organic whole. A higher type of aristocracy,—an aristocracy open to every aspiring soul, without legal privilege, based on merit, assigning its highest honor to highest service, welcoming the lowly-born Abraham Lincoln as heartily as the patrician-born George Washington,—to produce such an aristocracy is the only way to produce a healthful, happy, useful democracy ; and to help to establish this type of aristocracy throughout the world is the highest service which America can render to mankind, but this—just this, was what John Adams wished and worked for.

It is narrated that five days before that memorable fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence on which both he and Jefferson were to die, John Adams gave as a toast to be presented at the celebration to be held by his fellow-townsmen, the words INDEPENDENCE FOREVER. "In this brief sentiment," says his biographer, "Mr. Adams infused the essence of his whole character, and of his life-long labors for his country." But independence, however characteristic of the spirit and method, does not seem to me an adequate description of the "essence" of his labors. It is true that he maintained always an unusual degree of personal independence, and that he strove with all his might for "independent independence" in his country's behalf—but only as the necessary means to a certain end; and this end was the attainment of the "best character." The key to the politics of John Adams is the right and duty incumbent upon each citizen, each class, the people as a whole and mankind, of complete self-realization. To protect and assist the process by which this is accomplished, determines for him the form and functions of government and the aim of public policy. For the divine right to rule, whether claimed by king, parliament or party, he substituted the divine indefeasible right of the people to grow.

ANSON D. MORSE.